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ABSTRACT

The report describes an ethnographic study of a New York City (New York) middle school that focused on the school as a setting for cultural interchange. The relatively small school has an ethnically and culturally diverse student body that strives to build a strong feeling of community. The study looked at ways in which the school attends to students' personal and social needs, emphasis on experiential learning, what these approaches mean to students and their families, and some concerns among students, parents, and teachers about whether the school promotes academic growth sufficiently because of its focus on personal growth and learning by experience. It is concluded that if the school makes itself a home for students and families from diverse backgrounds, those groups will feel more connected at school, resulting in better learning. However, these approaches facilitating cultural interchange in social/emotional arenas may be seen as interfering with cultural interchange in the academic arena. Contains 7 references. (MSE)

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Balancing Home and School:

Dilemmas of Cultural Interchange

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Cultural Interchange in Urban Classrooms

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Jianzhong

Balancing Home and School: Dilemmas of Cultural Interchange

In 1995, I joined a group of my colleagues to work on the grant proposal on cultural interchange[1]. At that time, I just completed a dissertation on homework (Xu, 1994; Xu & Corno, 1998), case studies on how third grade children and their families did homework together. Although the children and parents in my sample represented different ethnic backgrounds, their views and practices of homework turned out to be astonishingly similar, a finding which intrigued me. As a person not born in the United States and lacking the formal K-12 educational experience, I have a natural interest in cultural interchange and felt, moreover, that I might bring an enriched perspective to this topic in general.

To teach successfully in the twenty-first century will certainly mean reaching an increasingly diverse body of students. Over the past two decades, researchers from various perspectives have documented the failure of the public school to reach, in a pervasive way, those from less socially advantaged strata including students of color, new immigrants, the poor, females, and second-language learners. A wide range of strategies have been proposed to facilitate learning with each of these groups of students and their families (Comer, 1988; Garcia, 1991; Kohl, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Orenstein, 1994; Rose, 1989; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988).

[1] During the 1996-97 academic year, a research team from the National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools, and Teaching (NCREST) began a study in four different schools which conceptualized the classroom as the most appropriate setting to study the process of cultural interchange. This work is supported by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement Field-initiated grant #R306F60079. The perspective represented here is mine, not the granting agency.

Despite all these efforts, little is known about how teachers and schools, on the one hand, and students and their families on the other hand, try to create a common ground. Our cultural interchange project grew out of this perceived need. By *cultural interchange* we mean the processes by which teachers, students, and their families with different traditions, values, and experiences, and from different life circumstances gain a greater mutual understanding, in order to enhance learning for all students. Of interest, for example, is how schools, teachers, students, and their families respond to differences in the cultural values and experiences. Also of interest is how and under what conditions cultural interchange take place.

According to our proposal, like my other team members, I was supposed to spend approximately ten days a month for a full academic year, in one classroom, to do ethnography on cultural interchange. After a three-hour conversation with the school director in late August, 1996, I started to think about the pros and cons of conceptualizing the classroom as the place where cultural interchange took place, as spelled out in our grant proposal. It was, no doubt, the small size of the school made me feel I could get around without getting lost, which permitted me to entertain the possibility of reconceptualizing the school as an more appropriate place to study cultural interchange in my setting. The school director supported, even welcomed, my adaptation of the original plan and said that she felt this approach would be more helpful for the school as a community, a primary goal of the school.

The middle school that I studied represents a new breed of schools that was tried to create a more personalized environment, in order to reduce the social distance between school and home, and to better serve the needs of early adolescents and their families from

diverse backgrounds in an urban environment. In this paper, I will illustrate how this school sought to accept students for who they were, to learn from their experiences, and to incorporate these experiences into school learning, in order to broaden their learning. Then I will turn to examine what this initiative meant to the students and their families, as well as some of the emerging dilemmas embedded in this initiative.

Since 1990, when the school was founded by its director and two teachers on the fifth floor of a century-old, elevator-less building, it has maintained its small size, approximately 140 students from grades 6 to 8. During the 1996-97 school year, 74% of the student body received free lunch, and an additional 7% received reduced price lunch. Fifty-eight percent of the students lived in a household with two parents.

According to the New York City Public Schools Official Class Ethnic Census Report, the student body for 1996-97 was 47% Latino, 34% African American, 10% Caucasian, 5% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1% American Indian or Alaskan. The remaining 3% was grouped under "CODE NOT ENTERED."[2]

Despite the school's ongoing effort to recruit teachers of color, the staff was less diverse than the student body. Only one of the nine full-time teachers was non-Caucasian.

Three Approaches to Facilitate Cultural Interchange

It seemed that the school used the following three interrelated approaches to make itself "a home away from home" for these early adolescents and their families from diverse backgrounds, in an effort to facilitate cultural interchange between families and school:

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[2] In reality, the student body was more diverse than indicated in the official census data. In my survey on homework distributed to students, their self identification presented a different picture. The self-identification of Latino, Caucasian, Asian/Pacific, and American Indian/Alaskan was comparable to the official ethnic census report, with no more than 3% difference. However, a striking difference was that 21% of them identified themselves as mixed.

building a school community; attending to students' personal and social needs; and emphasizing learning by experience. All of these approaches highlight the school's willingness to reformulate its curriculum and practice based on its evolving understanding of the ongoing experiences and real-life circumstances of the students and their families.

Building a School Community

First, the school strove to build a strong feeling of school community. The director stressed its importance for her students in this way:

> Kids need to feel safe to learn, and they need to feel safe to take chances when they learn, to try new things, to ask questions, to say that they're wrong or they need help. Communities that functioned in kids' lives, or people's lives in the past are weaker now. Neighborhoods do not have the strength that they used to have; Churches often don't; Families, extended families, are not as strong. We have more "only" children than we used to have. So the school for many kids *is* their community. As a country we're going to be a democracy, kids have to learn to live in communities, and so the school must function that way if there aren't other functioning communities in their lives.

The emphasis on building a school community including the staff, students, and families was embedded in the school's activities throughout the school year: from the stress on the importance of teamwork in athletic games during the Fall orientation, to twice a week advisory classes to create a sense of belonging among students, to the practice of multiage grouping in all subject areas, except math, to maximize social interactions among students in all grades; to thirty-minute-long teacher, child, and parent conferences, held twice a year, where all felt free to share home and school experience; to three-day all school trip, where parent volunteers joined teachers and children to explore nature away from the congested urban environment; to the Festival of Lights where students and their families

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Another difference was that only 24% of the students identified themselves as African American, 10% less than in the census data.

came together to celebrate and share their respective holiday traditions in one evening during the middle of December; and to the end of the year prom designed to make sure that all students could participate and enjoy. For example, during the school orientation in early September, staff members took the students to a nearby park one afternoon. The afternoon started with two structured group activities. One of them was to ask each advisory group to choose six students to participate in a team relay. Another was to ask each advisory group to select three students to shoot basketballs, of which one of them must be a girl. Later on, the staff organizer explained that these activities reflected the director's belief in the importance of group activities and of getting all students involved. The staff member said that whether students were physically strong or weak, or big or small, it was important to learn how to work together as a group.

Attending to Students' Personal and Social Needs

Also important was the school's emphasis on attending to children's personal and social needs. As the director argued, "If you don't deal with the whole of child at this age in particular, they're not able to learn." Also, "learning to get along with each other is a part of the curriculum." Not only was this considered as an important learning experience in itself, it was a doorway that made other types of learning at school possible.

In order to accomplish this goal, the school was organized into advisory groups, where each staff member, except the director and counselor[3], mentored a group of about 12 students. Care was taken in determining which students were placed with which staff. In general, the director wanted that each advisory group to include students from varying backgrounds, such as ethnicity, ability, sex, and grade level. Students, too, had input in

[3] Both of them worked with all the students.

the assignment process. For example, at the mid-year, the director shifted one 8th grade Latino girl to another advisory group, because the girl felt that her new advisor shared more similar life experiences with her. Twice a week advisory classes became one of the main vehicles for staff and students to voice concerns or share experiences. One mother noted that while her son generally did not want to reveal himself to others, in his advisory group, he was quite willing to discuss issues that he never mention home to his parents.

The advisory groups also became one of the main vehicles to connect the staff and families. At the first parents and staff meeting held the beginning of the school year, the director made clear how important it was for the school and parents to work together; and parents should not hesitate to call her or their children's advisors, "day and night," when something important arose. During the first meeting with parents and guardians in her advisory group, one staff member gave them three telephone numbers: one in general for weekdays, another for weekends, and a third for long weekends. Seeing that many looked puzzled as to why she gave all these numbers to them, she explained that how it was the tradition of the school, and she welcomed them or their children to call her or leave a message.

In addition to the advisory system, there were other built-in avenues for the school to attend to students' personal and social needs. During the Spring of 1997, there were classes held called "Boys Talk" and "Girls Talk," each led by a male and female staff member respectively. The purpose was to address a wide range of issues facing early adolescents in an urban environment, including drugs, sex, and domestic violence. Interestingly, in both the advisory classes and "Boys Talk"[4] helped to raise voices of a

[4] As a male, I was unable to observe Girls Talk for fear of making the class uncomfortable.

group of students who rarely spoke in other classes. Weekly, ninety-minute long staff meetings often became a regular forum where the staff shared their experiences in working with various groups of students, including important issues and concerns which emerged. Also, during parent, child, and teacher conferences, it was not rare for a teacher to ask a student in front of a parent such questions as, "How do you feel socially here?" Several times during the school year, some students received awards for their social and personal growth, or personal maturity, just as other students received awards for academic and athletic achievement.

Emphasizing Learning by Experience

Another related approach emphasized the importance of learning by experience. The school organized a variety of educational trips. Every fall, a schoolwide three-day camping trip to upstate New York was sponsored by a local agency, so that it was free to all students, staff, and parent volunteers. The trip gave these inner city youths a cherished opportunity to explore nature, through such activities as boating, fishing, hiking, building a shelter, and tracking animals. One of the challenges of organizing this trip was to persuade Latino parents to allow their adolescent daughters stay overnights. One school aide from the Latino community, who worked as the school secretary, acted as an outreach person to these parents. She took time to explain to them the benefits of this trip, as well as the precautions the school took to ensure their daughters' safety. Some of these parents were even invited to go on the trip with their daughters, to stay in their daughters' cabins at night. Because of the school's persistent effort, some 8th grade Latino girls were finally allowed by their parents to participate.

Other experiential activities included collecting leaves in the school neighborhood for studying in a science class, visiting art museums or immigrant history museums in a humanities class, and drawing sketches of a neighborhood building according to scale in a math class. The staff also promoted learning by doing within the classroom, from building a bridge and a motor-powered car in a science class, to having a debate about whether it was possible for Americans to be "separate but equal" in a humanities class.

What These Approaches Meant to Students and Their Families

It appeared that the school's intention and commitment in the areas just described were well received by the parents. Almost without exception, they were very appreciative of the school's efforts, feeling that the school cared for and took genuine interest in their children. One African American father pointed out that this was not the typical junior high school, where a principal just knew your kid's name because his file was sitting there on the desk. He found that the amount of interest, effort, and energy the staff showed for his son was extremely positive, concluding "that makes you want to keep your child there." Similarly, a Caucasian father remarked that "the caring they have for the children in this school is quite extraordinary. It's not the norm.... It's very difficult to find people who have the level of intelligence, the level of understanding, the level of commitment, and the human skills that they've got in this school." An African American mother felt that the school was becoming a family and that the staff members did "show genuine care; they're really interested in your child." her daughter was treated not just as "a number," but as "a human being." For example, in the middle of April, her daughter suffered a chest pain in school. When the ambulance arrived, but the mother couldn't get there to accompany her

daughter to a hospital, the school director went with her daughter and stayed with her in the emergency room, and the mother was very appreciative of this.

Some parents identified particular benefits that the school had given their child. One African American mother believed that her daughter benefited especially educational trips such as a three-day camping stay in upstate New York. Her daughter really liked this outdoor life, and the mother added, "It was even an experience for me because I'd never been to a camp." She applauded the school's efforts to organize trips around "everybody's history" and "cultural events" such as visits to an African burial ground and Chinatown. "This is really good for them [the students]" because "it opens the doors for them" and helps them to get along with each other. Also, she observed: "They're with kids their age, so they're going to pay more attention to what they're seeing and ask more questions than when they're with their parents." Equally important, she felt that the approach of actually going outside to learning from experience matched the "learning techniques" of African American children she observed in her neighborhood. She explained:

> To me, you can help Black children more by taking them outside.... That's how they learn. We're not stupid, it's just that our learning techniques are completely different. We learn more by actually doing it than reading about it or hearing about it. We have to do it to see it.

Another African American mother said that her son did extremely well on standardized tests, and he was a whiz kid and a star in his last school. However, "because of the composition in this school," she found that "being smart or a whiz kid didn't carry a lot of weight with the group of kids he's with now." In a way, she thought that this was good for her son, because it would encourage him to learn to get along with students from

different backgrounds, to come to value "other kind of smarts," to be compassionate with students who didn't have the advantages he had. She wanted her son to have this type of "humility" and "versatility."

She also noticed that her son had something that was woven into his personality and his understanding of the world: he wanted to be respected; he was not afraid of embarking on unknown territory; he would not back down to an authority figure if he thought he was right. She felt that her son was on that path before he came to this school, "but he was at an age where they could have torn it down just so easily and they didn't, and they built it up." For example, she felt, among other things, the school gave students a lot of room for them to get to hear the sound of their own voices. She felt that was possible because the school had "a genuine respect" for the kids of color, explaining:

> He's really experienced what it is to be respected as a person. I think he really gets that there. And I think at a lot of schools that's very hard to come by. I don't think kids are respected; I think the teachers are too busy to respect them. There's too much pressure, there's too much going on. The way the Board of Education works, I think children are belittled very much, but that doesn't happen at the school.

Like their parents, the students also had positive attitudes toward school. At the beginning of the first all school meeting on September 6, 1997, the director asked students what they thought about the school. Immediately, the following responses burst from every direction of the room: "Hands-on," OK school," "Fun," "People are nice," and "Free."

Students generally felt that the school cared for them, and that they were able to share their personal concerns with at least one staff member. One 8th grade Caucasian boy observed that if a student had a problem outside of school, such as having gotten into a

fight or losing a parent, he or she felt free to seek help at school. The students sensed an intimacy at school, that it was easy to make friends. Whether in classrooms, hallways, the gym, the lunchroom, or the playground, one rarely saw a student sitting, standing, or playing alone, a student was always with somebody else. One 8th grade Latino girl felt that "it's easy to make friends here because it's so small, we're like a family. We back up each other." Another Latino girl felt that "everyone gets along well," in the sense that she not only had fun with her friends, but also was able to talk to teachers personally.

In addition, students felt that they had a sense of control, freedom, and comfort at school. For one 7th grade Latino boy, freedom meant: "We can chew gum in class, and wear hats in class. In the morning we have unsupervised basketball, and we go out for lunch every day." For one 8th grade Latino girl, comfort meant that that she was able to approach the director to ask "Can I have this class about art or can I have this class about poetry or karate or basketball?" One African American mother observed that her son had found in many ways "a comfortable home" at school, "comfortably socially in some ways and there was a level of acceptance," in fact, that later when she attempted to take him out the school at the end of 6th grade, her son insisted that he stay.

Some Perceived Dilemmas

Some teachers, students, and their families expressed concerns about whether the school promoted academic growth sufficiently. First, they felt that the school paid more attention to social and personal issues than to academics. One teacher felt that the school was more about social learning, interpersonal relationships, and working in groups than about academic achievement. One 8th grade African American boy felt explained that "It's not like a real academic environment.... It focuses more on you as a person. He feared

that he would be disadvantaged when he got to high school "because I would not know quite a bit of things."

One African American mother felt that the school got more involved in her daughter's personal life than in her education. "School was second to them instead of being first." She was especially upset by the school's over-concern about her daughter's prom partner. One girl used to be her daughter's best friend. Their relationship changed as her daughter started to date the other girl's former boyfriend. Although the boy was not a student at the school, the changing relationship between her daughter and the other girl, and the reason behind the changed relationship soon became common school knowledge. The night before the prom, the family received three phone calls at night: from the director, from her daughter's advisor, and from the girl's advisor. The message was the same. All wanted to persuade her daughter not to bring the boy to the prom, for fear of hurting the other girl's feeling.

The mother felt that it was unfair for her daughter to feel "all the weight" in a situation she felt was unnecessary:

> Little personal problems [like this] that every child goes to as far as mixing and going out with girls or boys, every student does that sooner or later. That's not something you can make a big deal out of.

If it was going to hurt the other girl's feeling, she felt that it would be more appropriate for the school to call and inform her, and let her and the other girl's mother get together with the children and the teachers to discuss the issue. It was "not right" for teachers to "question her [daughter] constantly," this mother believed.

On the other hand, the mother said that the school staff had never phoned her about academic issues, such as whether her daughter needed extra help in reading and

math. The mother felt that she had received excessive feedback from the school over the prom, while she got less feedback from the school about far more important high school applications for her daughter, and her requested appointment with her daughter's advisor was considered unnecessary, and so was canceled. She could not understand how the school worked.

Second, it appeared that the freedom and comfort the school tried so hard to create for students might soften the academic demands on them. One 7th grade Latino boy felt that students had a lot of freedom at school, but he personally felt that it didn't prepare him well enough for high school, and he wanted something more challenging. Four or five friends in 8th grade had told him that they thought the school didn't prepare them well enough for high schools, especially to get into specialized high schools. One African American mother felt that teachers treated their students too much like friends now, and so they didn't push them hard enough academically. One Latino mother commented during a Teacher/parent/child conference: "If you really get a high pass for effort, I think it's very generous, and I think in high school it won't happen, so enjoy it while it lasts." Her son seemed to agreed, for he stated in a later interview, that only two teachers gave a lot of homework and refused to let students get away with failing to bring in homework. The rest of the teachers were very nice, he said, but they let students get away with too much. Another 8th grade African American boy who was recently transferred from another school concurred that "it's not like less work is better, but they [teachers] are kind of afraid to overwhelm the children with homework, or something like that."

Third, some members of the school community feared that the school's preoccupation with learning by experience might leave some students less prepared for the world beyond school, especially for those students whose families were unequipped to help them at home and whose future depended on the school's capacities for delivering everything, from basic writing skills to discussing big ideas. One teacher felt that because the school had a more broad curriculum that looks at these big questions and issues, it paid insufficient attention to a lot of academic skills:

> Like, how to really go about researching. Like, we say to kids, "Do research and write about it," "Do this creative project from your research." But, very few of us actually sit down and say, "This is how you do research." Or with writing, we do lots of creative writing. We do very little, "This is how you write an academic paper, and this is how you go about editing this academic paper and really polishing it up." So we're encouraging a lot of thinking, but not necessarily encouraging the skill stuff... But from my experience if you don't have the skill stuff, you know it inside, and I think that when you go to any situation that's more difficult academically, and you get behind, you're going to be in trouble. So I think it plays out later on.

One 8th grade girl made a similar point based on her own experiences:

> I feel that in the humanities classes, although you learn things you need to learn, it needs to be a little more traditional.... Some of the teachers here teach you with an opinion and that doesn't really help you very much because it's not the opinion that counts; it's the actual facts and things that happened.

In addition, this girl feared that she didn't learn much from some hands-on activities. For example, in one project, each student was assigned to a country where he or she had to look through magazines, cut out pictures of these countries, then glue these pictures to make a big mobile. The girl felt that the project was fun, but she explained, "I don't see the point of it," because "I'm not learning anything."

The same mother who felt that the school had a genuine respect for kids of color also worried about her son academically. Not because she felt that he couldn't pass his tests or graduate from a high school, but because she felt he was in "for a big surprise in terms of what's expected from him in the academic world." For her son, at 13 years old, "it's not enough to have good thoughts that you can spill on to a page, if you don't revise it." Like the teachers mentioned earlier, she felt that "we have ideas, what our kids need are skills to translate those ideas into the world," such as, how did the language work, how did this science concept work, how did I write that, how did a student write a letter to get a job? She thought that skills became an even bigger issue for students from non-white, middle class backgrounds, because these families relied exclusively on the school to prepare their children for high school and beyond, while most white middle class families would make sure that their children were going to get skills, but also because certain information exchange and skills development was part of the culture of these families, which their children would pick up automatically or even unconsciously.

Conclusions

It seems that the school has a theory of action, which can be summarized as follows. If the school makes itself a home for students and their families from diverse backgrounds, then students and their families will feel more connected at school; and this will result in better learning.

This theory rests on the assumption that the more school makes itself a home for students, the more students will feel connected at school. The data presented in this study seemed to support this assumption. The school used three interrelated approaches to bring home and school together at school, building a school community, attending to

students' emerging personal and social needs, emphasizing learning by experiencing. In so doing, most students and their families felt that they were more connected at school, and that their school was becoming a family, by respecting and taking genuine interest in students, by helping them get along, by creating a variety of learning opportunities that resembled and built upon their home experiences. For the majority of students, the school became a place they could gain a level of acceptance, and a sense of comfort and intimacy; a place they could turn for help whenever they needed it. Thus, it seemed cultural interchange took place in the sense that both the school, and students and their families intended to learn and were actually learning from each other. The school was learning in the process as well, as it acknowledged and valued the importance of homework experiences to connect and built upon them at school, by using a variety of vehicles to listen and attend to what its students and their families brought to the table.

Another assumption of this theory is that if students feel more connected at school, by itself, that will result better overall learning. The data presented in this study, at least, raised an important question about this assumption, which is: Does progress in cultural interchange in social/emotional area always bring sufficient progress in the academic area by itself? While the school became a home away from home for the majority of its students, some perceived dilemmas emerged. Some teachers, students, and their family members felt that the school now paid more attention to personal and social issues than to academic learning, that the comfort and acceptance it created for students might soften its academic demands on them, and that emphasis on learning by experience might leave some students without the sufficient skills they would need for high school and beyond.

These perceived dilemmas highlight the complexity of cultural interchange. It appeared that cultural interchange can be an uneven process. The approaches facilitating cultural interchange in the social/emotional area might be perceived to interfere with its occurrence in academic area. Two reasons might account for this unevenness.

First, the unevenness might occur as efforts invested in the social/emotional area could be perceived as *competing* for attention with these in the academic area, even though no participants suggested that these two areas could be separated from each other. For the mother who felt the school went overboard in interfering with her daughter's plan about the prom, she agreed that some situations do require the school to get more involved in children's personal and social life. She even found "it's cool that the teachers can be more than teachers to these students if the students have problems and they're comfortable enough to go to the teachers and tell them their problems." Still, she felt that children were in school primarily to learn, "to me, that should be the main focus." Likewise, the director recognized that there was often a tension between academic achievement and other goals, "Do we have a balance between academics and the other parts of kids' lives?" She acknowledged that sometimes the school did get too involved in the whole life of these students, as in the prom incident, which she felt was "certainly overkill" and "that got out of hand." However, she felt it was not always easy to determine how much involvement was necessary and how much was too much.

Secondly, the unevenness might occur as efforts invested in the social/emotional area were perceived as *undermining* progress in the academic area. Some participants felt that as the school tried to understand and accommodate the needs of its students for identity, comfort, and belonging, it changed the nature of the relationship between

teachers and students, so teachers became more like friends to students. Consequently, it might become increasingly hard for most of the teachers to place academic demands on students consistently.

To sum up, it appears that as a school makes itself a home for students, students feel more connected there. However, it is less certain whether this connectedness, by itself, will result in better overall learning. This raises a range of questions: Under what conditions, can progress in cultural interchange in social/emotional area result progress in the academic area? Or, what is the reciprocal relationship between cultural interchange in social/emotional area and cultural interchange in academic area?

Some of the concerns related to academic achievement were shaped by experiences and expectations of teachers, students, and family members about the life after middle school. As one teacher noted, these expressed concerns were about something not immediately apparent, but which might become a problem later on. Thus, another important question is this. As a school tries to learn and deal with what students and their families from diverse backgrounds bring to the table, how can it simultaneously take into account what these students and families think is most important and desirable for students to move on to the next table, and to incorporate their needs into the curriculum and provide scaffoldings for them to be successful when they leave the table? What this question clearly point to is that we need to view cultural interchange not only in present tense, but at the same time in terms of its future implications.

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